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**IS THE  
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CATHOLIC OR PROTESTANT?**

by  
The Reverend David W. Norton, Jr.



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## IS THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH CATHOLIC OR PROTESTANT?

**M**RS. LAWRENCE LAMBETH is a pillar of St. John's Episcopal Church, but her friends are by no means all Episcopalians. It happens that the two she sees most often are Mrs. Joseph Fitzgerald, president of the League of Catholic Women, and Mrs. Calvin Knox, a regular attendant at the First Presbyterian Church. Early one Sunday morning Mrs. Lambeth and Mrs. Fitzgerald met, returning from their respective churches. "What brings you out so early, Grace?" asked Mrs. Fitzgerald. "The same thing that brings you, I imagine. I've been to the Early Service." "I didn't know that you went so early," said Mrs. Fitzgerald, "but then you seem more like a Catholic." Mrs. Lambeth had been well taught. "Well, Margaret," she said, "you see, I really *am* a Catholic. Episcopalians are Catholics, but not being under the Pope, we aren't *Roman* Catholics. We have Bishops who come down from the Apostles. We have the Sacraments of the Church and you and I say in the same creed that we believe in the Holy Catholic Church."

It happened that a few days later Mrs. Lambeth and Mrs. Knox met at the Red Cross rooms. Said Mrs. Knox, "I see that the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians are



trying to get together. I should think it would be hard, we do things so *differently*. We seem to be more *Protestant* than you." "Oh, but we are Protestants in a sense," said Mrs. Lambeth. "The name of our church is 'The Protestant Episcopal Church.' Our kind of Catholicism is democratic, not autocratic, and we base all our teaching on the Bible, as all Protestants do."

Now what shall we say of Mrs. Lambeth? Does she really know what her church teaches? Or is she merely trying to please everybody? What does she mean when she says — and quite honestly — "I am a Protestant" and "I am a Catholic"? Is the Episcopal Church Catholic or Protestant, or in some way is it both?

Perhaps the best way to understand anything is to ask the question, "How did it get that way?", and we may well apply this method to the Episcopal Church and to its mother church, the Church of England. Though by no means willing to concede that the Church of England came into being as a new church at the time of the Reformation ("founded by Henry the Eighth," as is so often charged), we must admit that the course of the sixteenth century saw certain changes in the *appearance* and even in the *character* of English Christianity. There were two distinct phases of the Reformation in England, both profoundly affecting the character and the practice of the Church from that time on. The first we may call the political, the second the

doctrinal phase. The first occurred for the most part under Henry, the second under his children and successors, Edward and Elizabeth.

This is not the place to go into detail concerning Henry's marital difficulties, or the complex relation between the divorce case and the overthrow of the Pope's supremacy. Suffice it to say two things: first, that the king's demand for an annulment of his marriage with Catherine hastened and precipitated the inevitable reaction against the corruption and abuses of the papal system, and second, that Henry's desire for an annulment was due not so much to his desire for Anne Boleyn as for a legitimate male heir to succeed him on the throne. In order to secure the annulment Henry overthrew the Pope's power and authority, and henceforth Christianity in England was to be not *Roman* but *English*, looking for earthly authority, not to the Bishop of Rome but to the Bishops and Archbishops of England and to the English Crown. Along with that change in the government of the Church went the clearing away of many superstitions. But (and this is very important) there was no idea in anyone's mind of changing any of the fundamentals. When Parliament declared Henry to be the "Supreme Head" of the Church of England, it did it "without intending to vary from the congregation of Christ's Church concerning the very articles of the Catholic Faith." Appeal was made to English history, and examples cited of earlier

English kings who had implicitly exercised just such authority over the English Church as Henry was explicitly claiming. The Church of England continued to be the Catholic Church in England. The same clergy, with few exceptions, continuing in office, believed themselves to be still functioning as bishops and priests of the Catholic Church. The sacraments were still administered. The same faith was taught. The same creeds were said and believed, and such have continued in the Church of England and in the Episcopal Church in this country to this day.

It was in the later reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth that ideas which we think of as Protestant came to affect the life and teaching of the English Church. Protestant reformers, disciples of Luther and Calvin, came to England bringing the teachings of the newly-founded European Protestant churches. During the reign of Henry's Roman Catholic daughter Mary, many English people fled persecution at home and took refuge in Protestant cities abroad. Returning in the reign of Elizabeth, they brought with them ideas which they had found in the German cities and in Calvinist Geneva, and sought to introduce them at home. What, of these ideas, had permanent effect on the Church of England?

One of the most important contributions of the Reformation was the deeper meaning given to the word "faith." Faith, which in the Catholic Church had come

to mean believing with the mind whatever the Catholic Church taught, was seen to mean something much more: a deep, personal loyalty to Christ and trust in Him. Compare the following phrases from a modern Roman Catholic "Act of Faith" and from our own service for the baptism of adults. "My God, I firmly believe that Thou art one God. . . . I believe all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches, because Thou hast revealed them Who canst neither deceive nor be deceived." And from our Prayer Book, "'Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ the son of the living God?' 'I do.' 'Dost thou accept Him and desire to follow Him as thy Saviour and Lord?' 'I do.'" Do you see the difference? The one signifies assent by the mind to an authoritative church; the other commits the whole man to personal allegiance to the living Christ. And in this conception of faith the Reformers were putting forth no new invention. They were reviving the teaching of the New Testament, the "faith" of St. Paul. The rediscovered understanding of faith became deeply rooted in English religion, and so affects our own. It is found, as we have seen, in the Service of Baptism, and also in the services of Confirmation and Holy Communion.

With it came, naturally, a renewed emphasis on what we call "personal religion." So dominating had the mediaeval church become, that the individual and his relation to God had been nearly obscured. Now it was revived.

Probably the most important characteristic of the



Reformation was the revived emphasis upon the Bible and its use by the common Christian. This revival, which was begun in England under Henry VIII, was continued and strengthened under his successors. Copies of the Scriptures, in English, found their way into every English home, and became the daily reading of the common people. As the services of the Church were translated and revised, the Bible became central in them. Above all, the English Church became firmly and permanently committed to the teaching that no belief should be required of men which could not be based firmly on the Word of God in the Scriptures.

Thus by looking upon the process of history we can see how two important streams of truth converged to make the Church of England (and hence our own church) what it is today. Without interruption, from Christ and His Apostles has come the main stream of traditional, Catholic faith and practice. Joining and augmenting it at the time of the Reformation is the vigorous stream of Protestant truth. The two are not essentially hostile. They do not contradict but complement each other. Speaking broadly, history has fused the two into one,—the Anglican Christianity which we know today. That is how it can be claimed for our church that it is both Catholic and Protestant.

Unfortunately, in another sense, the fusion has not been completed. Though the Church as a whole is truly

representative of the Catholic and Protestant elements which compose it, few individuals or groups within it are large enough to grasp the whole of the truth. With many churchmen it is "either . . . or," not "both . . . and." Ever since the Reformation, the pendulum has swung this way and that. In the eighteenth century many Evangelicals, attempting to revive personal religion and to restore the centrality of the individual's relationship with Christ, met with such hostility in the Church of England that they left it, often with deep regret, to found the Methodist Church. A century later another group, attempting to revive and re-emphasize their church's Catholic heritage, met with such opposition and persecution that many of them seceded to Rome.

And today, though much of the violence has gone out of the controversy, there are too few parishes in the American Episcopal Church, too few priests, too few laymen, who can see both sides, and grasp the whole truth. In any large city one can find Episcopal churches, often within a few blocks of each other, known (depending on the point of view) as "hotbeds" or "strongholds" of Catholic teaching or Evangelical (that is, Protestant) truth. Going to one the worshipper finds the word "Protestant" and all that it stands for minimized or if possible ignored. All that is Catholic is played up and emphasized, while in the other church "Catholic" is emptied of its meaning if not actually denied. The regular supporters of both

parishes look forward to the day when the whole church shall be conformed to their likeness. Not content with being "Episcopalians," they label themselves "Catholics," "Evangelicals" or "Protestants" and call each other less flattering names.

A very different picture of the Church, as it should be, has been drawn by the present Archbishop of Canterbury. When he was enthroned at Canterbury, Dr. Fisher said, "The stresses within the Church of England, so far as they are due to tensions between divine truths imperfectly integrated by men, are signs of truthfulness and health. They may easily be allowed to cause a confusion of voices. But it is the conviction and justification of the Church of England that Christ meant us to essay this difficult comprehension, to hold together within our communion what may not be put asunder without grievous injury, and to present, as far as we may, the wholeness of the gospel of Christ."

The Archbishop speaks of an integration and a comprehension of the various elements within the Church. It is not enough that the Catholic tradition and the Protestant tradition coexist in tolerant juxtaposition, like neighbors of different backgrounds who decide to "live and let live." They must be reconciled and fused into a real unity. This fusion can and should begin with the thinking of the individual churchman, as he seeks to appreciate his church in its fullness, and to broaden his own practice of

its religion within its wide scope. For instance, as heir of the Church Catholic he should be regular and devout in his use of the Church's sacraments, and as heir of the Reformation, he should be faithful in his study of the Word of God.

Then, as he goes out into his own parish, the churchman should try very hard to practice charity towards those members of it whose ways and background in the Church are different from his own. Mrs. Highchurch should realize that Mr. Loways, who never bends his knees before the altar, is quite as capable of making a devout communion as she, while Mr. Loways realizes that Mrs. Highchurch's genuflections are not necessarily an indication of idolatry. When something new is introduced into the service (and "new" usually means new to the observer) one should realize that what seems a novelty has probably been tested by centuries of Christian practice, and is a fuller filling out of the Church's rich tradition.

Archbishop Fisher spoke of the special vocation of the Church of England (in which our church shares) to make the difficult comprehension and to fuse together the different elements which make it up. Within our church, as we have seen, are the essentials of both Catholicism and Protestantism. We share much with our neighbors on either hand. Our church has been called the "Church of the Reconciliation." Our duty, under God, would seem to be to reconcile the varying traditions within our own body, to make of them a genuine unity,



to show by our own life that Catholicism and Protestantism are not hostile and irreconcilable, but that they can unite to form a richer and completer Christianity.

It is a long time since we left our friend Mrs. Lambeth in conversation with Mrs. Knox. Before leaving her for good, let us make a final estimate of her statements on her and our Church. On the whole she is right. The Episcopal Church is both Catholic and Protestant. If she erred at all, it was in soft-pedalling its "both . . . and" character. It is Protestant in its loyalty to the Bible, its insistence on faith as personal loyalty and trust, and Catholic in its firm adherence to the faith and practice which have come down unbroken through the centuries.